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THE COMING CRISIS, BREATH & YELLOW VESTS: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

DOCUMENTATION CRISIS, FRANKREICH, GILET JAUNES, MARXISM, RIOT, STRUGGLE

*Originally published in French on **Paris-Luttes.info** on Jan. 11th 2019. Translated by our collaborator in French, **Otto Mattik** and edited by us at **Ediciones Inéditos**. It is a glimpse at the looming capitalist crisis to come and how the writer in France figures the Yellow Vests movement within it and what antagonistic developments the movement can bring. What follows is the translation.*

GENERAL REMARKS

We will not dwell on the usual left-wing debates held between Leftists on the Yellow Vests movement. Nevertheless, here are some remarks of a more or less general nature to clarify the place from which we're talking about.

We participated in the yellow vests since the first week of mobilization. On the 17th, we were skeptical. On the 18th, we were forced to realize that something else was happening than a simple public demonstration from the far-right electorate. On the 19th, we had to go and check the roundabouts and highway tolls closest to us. Since then, our excitement has not faltered.

THE SITUATION

Macron and his government are afraid, they sweat, they wear makeup to go out, they cancel their holidays for fear of being indecent. The yellow vests would be the one and only reason. Let us take the reflection a little further.

The central States of integrated world capitalism are all over-indebted. This is not new, the observation has been a consensus since 2008. But since then, what has been the response of the capitalist class to relaunch a new cycle of accumulation? None of them seem to take over, since none of them seem serious enough.

Automation, generalization of the status of self-employed and uberisation of certain sectors, ideological constructions of independence processes (regional – Catalonia... – or national – USA, England...) to give a social meaning to the nationalist problem. All these options, in the end, do not succeed in masking the only two ones that currently have a real dynamic at the international level to counter the tendency of the rate of profit to fall: government and central bank indebtedness (buybacks of rotten assets, interest-free loans via quantitative easing policies, etc.) and lowering of labor costs (lower wages, precarious employment status, cuts in social benefits, etc.).

These two levers encompass and contain all the others. Automation and uberization are parts of it, but cannot be imposed on a global scale to offer a stable economic model, and everyone knows it.

Through these two levers, the first signs of a major-scale crash are emerging, of which 2008 was only the trailer. Admittedly, there is still room for maneuver on the side of lowering labor costs: so far, there are sufficiently few of those who have really “nothing to lose” for the State repression to manage to control them.

Attempts at populist, even post-fascist counter-revolutions, such as the 5-star movement in Italy, the Brexit in England, the Orban government in Hungary, and more generally the rise of the far right in the central countries of accumulation, do not seem to be able to calm the situation or to catalyze populations in the long term through nationalist ideology. Even when it works for a while (and, here, we do not underestimate the dangers of these “times”, however “short” they might be...), social issues resurface and protest is reborn from its ashes (see, for example, the fight against Orban’s “labour law” since the end of 2018, despite the weather and the total government control over the local media).

To sum up from a historical point of view: the quantitative extension of capital (extension of the capitalist production process to all social spheres of human existence, throughout the entire territory of the planet) seems complete or at least advanced enough to no longer be a source of new structuring profits; the increase in productivity has brought about a second cycle of general accumulation (Fordism, Taylorism...), but had to relocate and slow down its fervor in view of the conditions of production it introduced; the dissolution of all the obstacles to the reproduction of the capitalist social relationship (globalization of the economy, precariousness of the status and jobs, management of surplus populations, etc.) and the indebtedness of States have been accumulating since the 1980s, but now seem to reach their own limits...

This leads us to put a concept on the table: the **impossible restructuring**. Populism will not be the counter-revolution, since it does not propose (at least for the moment) any real economic response. A counter-revolution is first and foremost a restructuring of the accumulation cycle, of the foundations on which it is built, extended and consolidated. However, if not in the realm of ideology, often rancid, the populist movement never imposes itself on the economic scene, which is itself ultra-complexified, inter-connected and therefore immutable in appearance since the restructuring of the 1980s: what else explains Brexit or the election of Syriza other than the effect of advertising, followed by retreat? In reality, “protectionism” is inapplicable in the current state of affairs and everyone up there knows it, which may also be why they are freaking out...

The few protectionist/trade war situations lead to a destabilization of product prices and a disruption of the interconnected (so-called) global balance that the business world, hand-in-hand with the major international political authorities, has been struggling to shape for 50 years. All economies are at a standstill, and the possibilities for recovery are in fact more than limited (see again, Portugal’s scam as a “revived left-wing economy”¹).

All this to get to the point: for Christmas, Wall Street was at its lowest level since 2008, we just avoided a small crash thanks to the artificial closure for the holidays, the Tokyo stock exchange panicked in turn and plunged by 5%... In short, it would seem that the conditions for a major world depression to come are shaping up at a speed that is not surprising (the lessons of 2008, from a strictly reformist point of view, have not been taken at all... But is it possible to *only* change the course given the enormity and international interpenetration of our ways of producing, distributing, distributing and financing our activities?).

SOME SIGNS IN BULK:

- Europe: British goods exports have collapsed to levels not seen in three years (manufacturing industry is down, see the significant decline in car production and sales). In Germany, the implementation of a minimum wage has not reduced the number of mini-jobs (especially since they have just reduced the threshold of hours worked for these precarious part-time jobs limited to 450 euros, without any social security contributions nor pensions). Italy and its “populist” economy, in conflict with Europe, seems to be sinking into a budget deficit... Logically, its interest rates are rising. How far will the conflict go and what will be the real consequences? Let us recall the Greece of Syriza...
- Trade tensions are not without consequences in China: a sharp drop in job openings in the manufacturing sector; a fall in retail sales growth (in November it was at its slowest pace in 15 years); the lowest industrial production in the last three years... The country’s annualized official growth is at its lowest since 2009, and China is forced to correct its financial excesses and over-capacities, which is dragging the entire Asian region into its slowdown (e.g. loss of momentum in Malaysia, Taiwan... See South Korea/China export decline in December). The slowdown in the Chinese economy also threatens to remove essential support for the global export and import sectors. In Asia too, Japan is heading straight toward a debt crisis of a scale we not even know here... If it will not be the trigger, how will it get his head up in the middle of the international slump that is coming?
- The world’s largest economy (USA) is being hit, despite growth driven by tax cuts and seemingly lower unemployment than ever², by very low productivity and a high dependence on external capital and goods. The illusion of the “Trump Plan” will soon fade away; investors already share their fears for the future. Ray Dialo, founder of the largest hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, estimates that the dollar (the world’s leading reserve currency for foreign investors) could fall by 30% in the next two years. “As in 1929-1933, after the 2007 crisis we increased debt to support markets and economic activity”³

As the massive injection of liquidity into the financial sectors cannot last forever, as central banks no longer have any ammunition, and as the risks of falling growth are accentuated both by geopolitical tensions and by major ecological challenges (climate change and the energy question – oil in particular), it seems obvious that what is to come over the next ten years is not funny at all.

THE YELLOW VESTS AS A SIGN

Thus, we believe that the Yellow Vests movement is a precursor of the struggles to come in this depressive cycle. On the one hand, in its language and mobilization, both heterogeneous and spontaneous: the populist grammar, that of a "people" against its "elites", surely represents the ideological offensive closest to a counter-hegemony at the present time. This is not a bad judgment: we think that in action, when this ideology leads people to rise up, it leads to improbable encounters and moments of struggle that transform subjectivities and direct thoughts quite logically towards social issues. However, the dynamics are not so simple or clean, since "populism" and its language carry within them a multitude of possibilities that mix the political spectrum in length and breadth.

On the form (blocking of flows, wild occupation of roundabouts, tolls and highways, riots not legally declared and combativity), it seems obvious that the G-J movement is significant for what is coming. Inter-union "social movements" have not won anything, or almost anything, for more than twenty years. The tradition demonstrations, resulting from the workers' counter-culture and its identity prior to re-structuring, will no longer be able to be hegemonic.

The impossibility for politics to get out of periods of crisis except through repression, propaganda and the ideological construction of rancid national units, will at one time or another lead these dynamics of struggle to their own overflow. Repression is creating generations of revolutionaries to come; propaganda is pushing thousands of households to desert their television sets. As the economic lever is by nature unstable, because it has become uncontrollable from a sovereign and national point of view (even more so than it has ever been), politics will gradually come up against a wall.

Economic nationalism, in its failures, will have to prove itself in the "societal" field, particularly in the hunting of migrants. The fact that struggles are breaking out at the moment must be taken seriously: the intensity of these occasions, the encounters it allows, represent the best tools against racist and nationalist ideology... unless we leave the racists and nationalists with the "apolitical" insurgents! It is our responsibility to get involved, as part of the proletariat, in the movements of insubordination that our period carries. All the more so as things, on this side, will also accelerate (mixing of populations; future migrations driven by climate change and repeated wars, etc.).

WHERE WILL THIS MOVEMENT GO?

It's impossible to predict. Will last week's real surge resist the revised and corrected measures of January 12? Will decentralized and local actions, blockades, occupations held during the week persist? Will they succeed in reviving themselves, or is the rhythm getting tangled up in Saturday's dramatization? Will targeted repression and mutilation give rise to a people who are certainly insurgent, but who are still a minority on the streets?

These are all questions that are not interesting to answer, since we are not prophets. That said, one wonders why so many people accustomed to social movements refuse to involve with a mass they seem to despise? On our side, we had the impression that the unionized masses and hippies of Nuit Debout were just as confused in their ideological postures.

The question is: let us stop limiting ourselves to ideology. Books don't bring consciousness. The action, fervor and intensity of the pre-insurgency periods, lead multiple consciences to structure themselves in radicality. Without playing the bad Leninists, we have a say in this structuring: not as an enlightened vanguard, distributing good and bad points, bringing its new language norms and militant obligations (professional militants are never far from the priesthood), but as participants forced to sell their labor-power and being just as worried about our future as anyone else. Our militancy has provided us with an experience that is not to impose, but rather to adapt and bring in support, to propose.

Locally, however, we have seen leftism get entangled in its worst acts. The worst of them consists in trying to impose centralized General Assemblies by region, against the will of most of the participants in the movement (who understand that an occupied roundabout becomes an Action Committee on its own, and that the only questions to be asked are not ideological but practical, they are those of the measures to be taken, the supplies, the organizations to carry out the occupation and the actions it gives itself). Others can be mentioned, such as these Alternatiba activists who are determined to trade the criticism as an act of production (via the blocking and multiplication of sharing) for abstract/ideological criticism of consumption and consumers (anti-advertisement actions, brand blockages accompanied by militant messages...).

The desire to put an end to representations, mediations, and to intensify the struggle for struggle, beyond ideological presuppositions (presuppositions that are always shifting and uncertain... except among closed Leninist militants and post-modernists), is indeed the strongest gesture of the yellow vests movement. The multiplication of anchoring points, designed as meeting points, materializes this gesture. That's what we have to grow.

Disseminate our collective art and memory (not that of the old workers' movement; but for example, photos of wounded people of the movement printed in large format, glued on posters or in the streets before/during demonstrations; or our funny and evocative graffiti); propose reflections and reports in the form of info-kiosks (not those inhabited by activists' pamphlets, but rather by booklets made occasionally, about the movement, for movement); bring care/protection/defense equipment to demonstrations (we already see yellow vests bringing their own reinforced banner, their own teams of street medics, etc.); participate in Facebook groups as lambdas participants (ideological debates are at game there); come to the places of blockages to be more numerous... It is in these actions that our participation has made sense, has carried meanings.

A LITTLE STRATEGIC SUGGESTION....

Why not propose to all the local groups in which we participate that Act 10 be the one for the reconquest of local anchorage points? *Imagine: 400 points recaptured in a single day, a hundred of (re)built cabins in the afternoon, all over the country, big*

meals shared in the evening, concerts, parties, balls (depending on the context)! No riot porn, to be sure, but maybe a new breath!

In any case, the next breath is the crisis that is coming. It will not be easy. It's not going to be happy. At least not only. But certainly, the existing order will be transformed. It's not necessarily reassuring, but at least exciting, right? Unless we prefer the already dead and buried History, militancy for militancy in a world frozen by the triumph of liberal democracies...? Come on, let's wake up!« Alternatives Economiques », *Pourquoi le Portugal ne va pas si bien qu'on le dit*, 30 août 2018.

Without accounting for how the article does not go into the problems of endemic corruption nor surplus populations – which are very numerous and definitely remain "outside" of any statistics. 2 We know that this decline is illusory: there is a fall in the rate of participation in the job market, with a growing number of inactive adults, men in particular (23 million inactive adults from ages 25 to 45 years are totally left out of all employment statistics), a rise in the amount of older adults returning to work, concordant with the rise of precarity among the elderly. See : Libération, *États-Unis : chômage, un taux trop bas pour être vrai*, Frédéric Autan, 30 septembre 2018

3Les Echos, *Le fondateur du plus gros hedge fund livre sa vision des marchés*, Nessim Ait-Kacimi, 27 décembre 2018, mis à jour le 7 janvier 2019

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